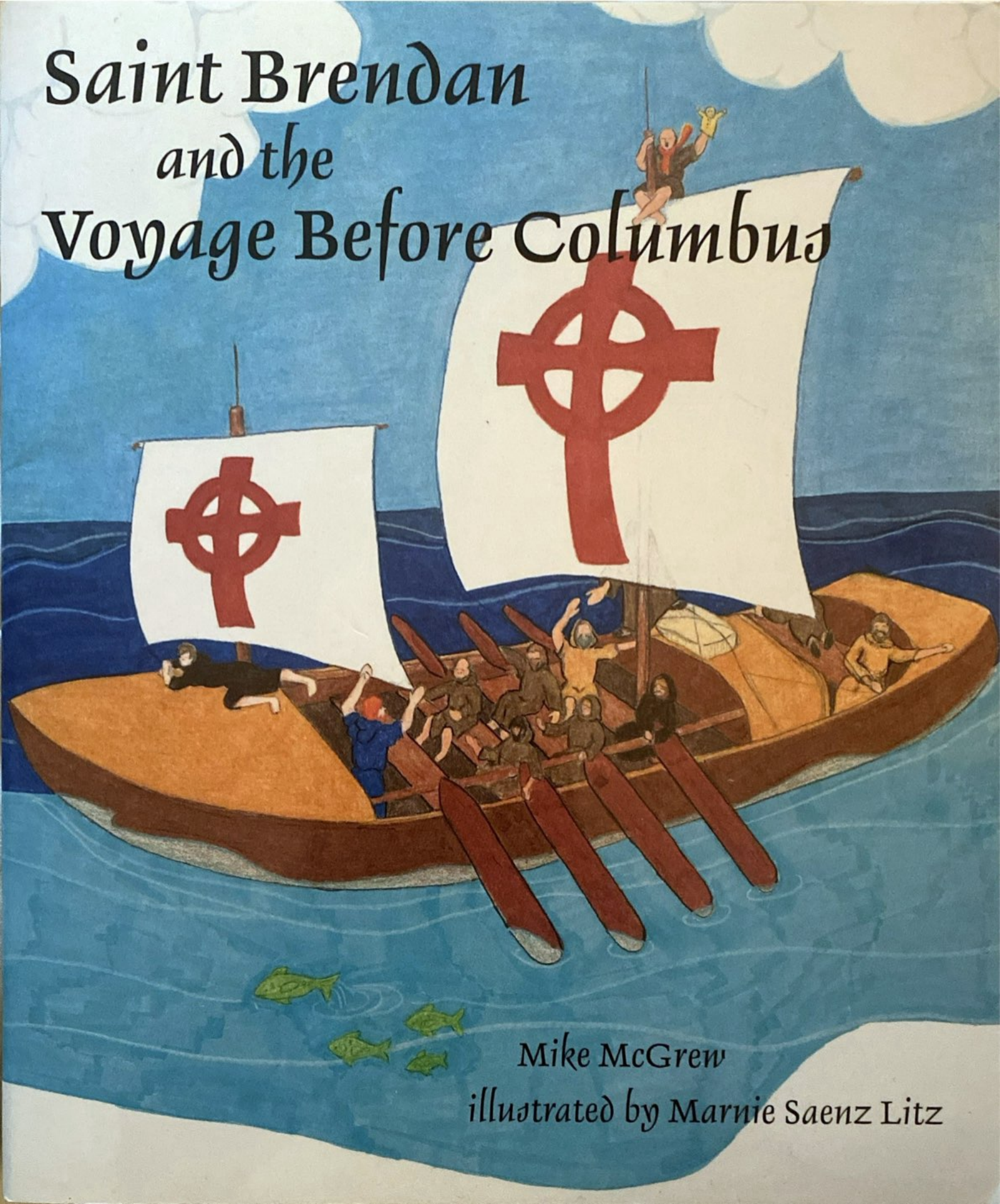
Saint Brendan and the Voyage Before Columbus



Mike McGrew

illustrated by Marnie Saenz Litz

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To my wife Monica,
my parents John and Carolyn,
and my children—Brendan, Sean, and Kelsey
Mike McGrew

To my wonderful and encouraging husband Dan—
I thank God for every day.
And to Jacob, the light of our life—
May you continue to grow in the knowledge and love of Christ Jesus.
With Him, all things are possible!
Marnie Saenz Litz

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St. Brendan lived about fifteen hundred years ago. He was born in Ireland, the land of a thousand shades of green. He became a priest, then a bishop, and built many monasteries. In one monastery alone, three thousand monks listened to his call to serve God! Brendan also traveled to England and Scotland and built monasteries there, too. His hard work sharing the Gospel is why the Church calls him a saint.

While this work was important, Brendan is also remembered for something entirely different, a voyage so fantastic many people believed it was only a legend....

When St. Brendan was born in the year 484, it is said that his birth set the nearby woods ablaze. Taking this as a sign from God, Bishop Erc chose Brendan to enter a special school.

Sister Ita's school was less about books and more about nature. Soon Brendan came to know the wind and water and skies as forever-friends.

When Brendan turned ten, Bishop Erc called him to live for God by becoming a monk.

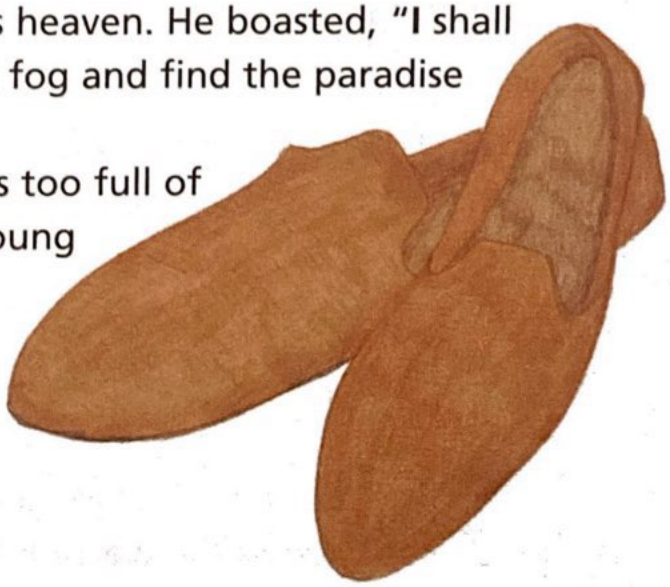
"It will not be easy," Erc said. "We work and pray and sing all day. But you alone will learn from me the secrets of God's stars and seas."

Brendan went with Erc and lived a monk's simple life in a beehive-shaped stone hut by the sea. In the ocean he found God's peace and power.

Often Erc and Brendan searched the skies for clues about the weather. Using Erc's charts, they sailed to visit brother monks on nearby islands. The island monks sang of an undiscovered paradise, the Promised Land of the Saints:

"The Land of Youth, our *Tir-na-n-Og,*
On shores beyond the western fog,
Where death and tears are never seen,
Where flowers and trees are ever green,
A kingdom come that knows no sin,
A place no monk has ever been."

Brendan vowed to sail to this heaven. He boasted, "I shall sail one day through the western fog and find the paradise *Tir-na-n-Og!*"



Erc worried that Brendan was too full of pride. When the boy became a young man, Erc sent him inland on foot and commanded,

"Call men to God.
Help those in need.
Be humble in thought.
Be thoughtful in deed!"

Brendan traveled inland and preached about God. He humbly learned to think of himself last and to laugh at himself first. He called others to join him, singing,

"Come with me and you shall see
How happy the life of a monk can be!"

Crosan, a jester, and Cronan, a storyteller, pledged to follow Brendan everywhere.

Before Bishop Erc died, he asked Brendan to take his place leading the monks. Erc then passed on his gold cross and his secret charts for a voyage to *Tir-na-n-Og*.

Brendan worked hard sharing God's good news. He led three thousand men to become monks and was named bishop. But the songs of *Tir-na-n-Og* and Erc's secret charts still stirred his soul. Brendan prayed: "What should I do?"

Finally certain that God wanted him to live his dream, Brendan selected twelve monks to go with him. Then he built a strong sailboat called a curragh. He covered its wooden skeleton with ox-hides, sealed it with animal fat, and strapped on spoonlike oars. He christened the curragh *The Erc,* declaring,

"The stars by night, Erc's charts by day,
The winds and birds, the current's play—
All these God's gifts to guide my way."

Brendan and the other monks prayed and fasted to prepare themselves. They set sail that fall, with Crosan hanging from the mast, leading them in song.

One day a fierce storm drove them to mountains of waterfalls. Brendan called this *The Isle of Streams.* Tired and hungry, the monks' spirits soared when they found mysterious baskets of bread waiting on shore.

At their next landfall, Brendan found huge gnarled trees where magnificent white birds chirped in harmony as the monks sang. Brendan called this island *The Paradise of the Birds.* They spent Pentecost entertained by music, Crosan's tricks, and Cronan's tales.

They found another island—but when they beached, it suddenly groaned and spouted water! Clinging to the ropes, Brendan steered clear of the first whale he had ever seen. Laughing, he named it Jasconius and sang,

"Mighty beast,
So wondrous odd,
A holy guide from holy God."

The monks set off again, but after rowing forty days they were lost and starving. Finally they spotted a glistening iceberg that Brendan called *The Pillar of Crystal*.

Suddenly, ice chunks from the Pillar rammed their vessel, and Crosan plummeted into the water. Praying for a miracle, the monks put themselves into God's hands.

Majestically, Jasconius rose from the sea with Crosan on his back!

The great beast led them safely to *The Isle of Fruit.* Hanging on every vine were grapes the size of plums. Grateful for God's help, the monks strengthened themselves before heading south.

In the south, a smoky peak emerged from the ocean. Thundering, it shot flaming balls that boiled the sea! The monks felt sure they were doomed to what Brendan called the *Fiery Mountain of Hell*.

At last, a southwest wind grabbed hold of *The Erc.* When it finally let go, Brendan joyfully beheld *Tir-na-n-Og's* wondrous shores. Greeting the monks were exquisite flowers, colorful birds, and bronzed people Brendan called the painted saints.

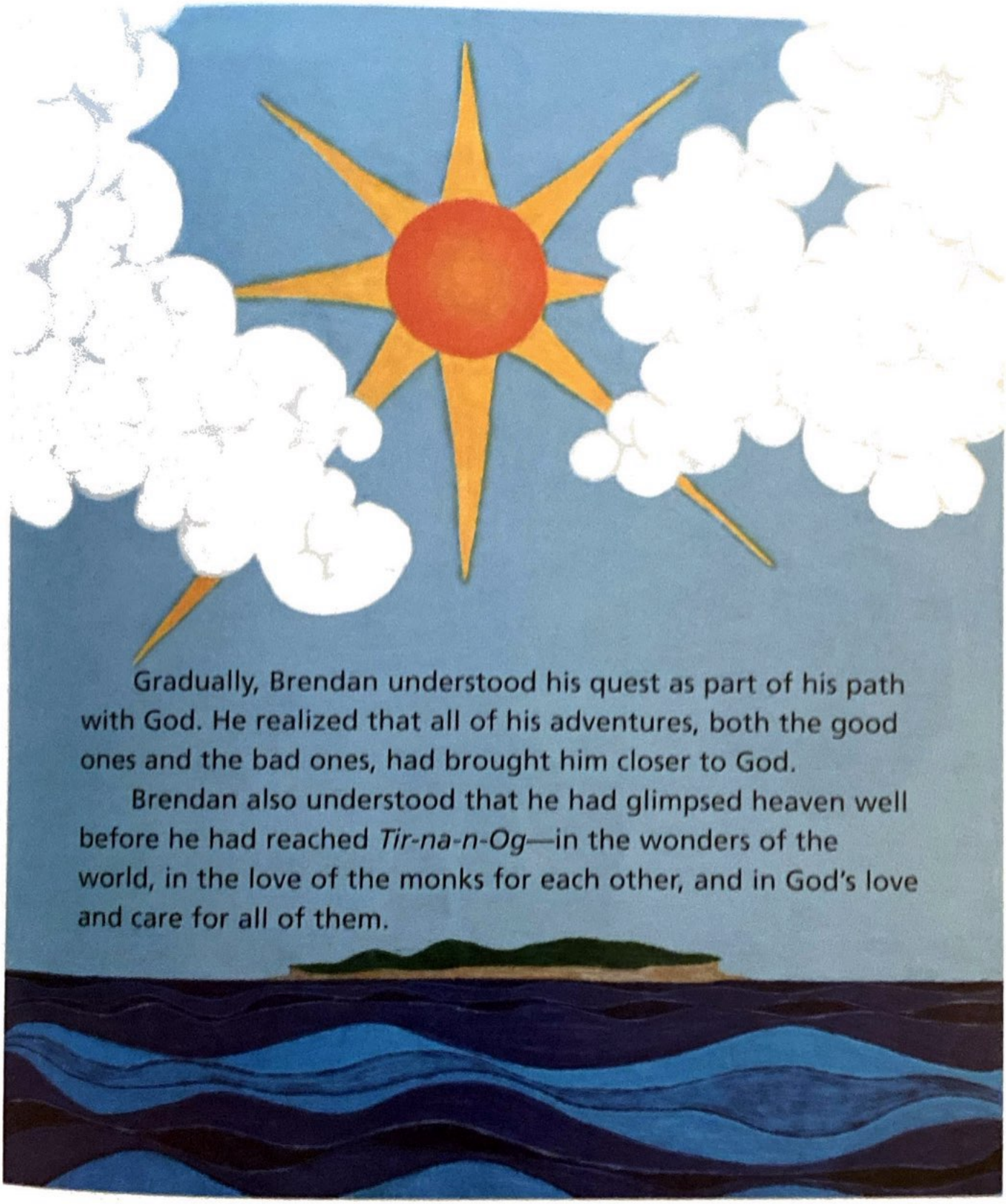
Celebrating, the monks exchanged presents with the people and praised God.

In time, Brendan sadly discovered that *Tir-na-n-Og,* though beautiful, was not heaven, and that the painted saints were only men.

Then Cronan fell ill with a strange disease and died. Brendan wept in anguish.

Blaming himself for his friend's death, he planned his return to Ireland. Before he left, he gave the painted men Erc's gold cross and shared stories of Jesus and the new life God promises.

Arriving home, Brendan was welcomed by huge crowds as a hero given up for dead. He had been gone seven years! But even with the excitement, he despaired that his voyage had been a foolish one.



Gradually, Brendan understood his quest as part of his path with God. He realized that all of his adventures, both the good ones and the bad ones, had brought him closer to God.

Brendan also understood that he had glimpsed heaven well before he had reached *Tir-na-n-Og*—in the wonders of the world, in the love of the monks for each other, and in God's love and care for all of them.

Brendan the Navigator, patron saint of sailors, lived simply but happily until his death in 577.

"I sailed these seas through western fog,
I found and lost my *Tir-na-n-Og*.

But I lived my quest,
Survived so blessed.
I found God's earthly paradise
In nature, love, and sacrifice."

Epilogue

Famous maps from Brendan's voyage show that *Tir-na-n-Og* was actually North America. Yet many people continued to doubt that he could have survived such a journey. Almost a thousand years later, Columbus studied Brendan's charts to prepare for his own famous voyage. Then, in 1976, an Irish sailor named Tim Severin built another curragh using Brendan's plans. He repeated each island stopover, landed in North America, and showed all doubters that Brendan's quest was real.

Today, along Brandon Bay in Ireland, where Brendan's voyage began, the songs of *Tir-na-n-Og* barely whisper within the empty beehive huts of stone. Yet Brendan's spirit will always stir in souls who seek God in sea and sky and who live their dreams before they die.

Juvenile/Saints/Irish

Children will be astounded to learn that Ireland's Saint Brendan may have sailed to North America almost a thousand years before Columbus, in just a small open boat with a handful of brave monks—a trip that's been duplicated and proved possible in modern times.

This full-color picture book weaves together legends as well as the saint's own account of his voyage—which Columbus himself is said to have relied on. The book follows Brendan from his birth, through his incredible seagoing adventures, to his return home to Ireland. Kids will not only be entertained by Brendan's exciting quest; they will also discover a timeless story about following one's dream, finding friendship, and coming to trust in God's care.

Dr. Mike McGrew has worked as a special educator, crisis counselor, school psychologist, and college instructor, and is currently Supervisor of School Psychology and Special Programs in Maryland's Carroll County Public Schools. He and his wife have three children, the eldest of which is named Brendan. Mike lives at the perfect children's author address—on Peppermint Lane.

Illustrator **Marnie Saenz Litz** finds endless ways to incorporate art and design into her personal and professional life—most recently as director of public relations at the Grand Hyatt in Washington, DC. She now does design and public relations consulting work from her home office. She and her husband and their young son live in Millersville, Maryland.

Ages 4 to 8

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